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The Merchant-Diplomat in Comparative Perspective: Embassies to the Court of Aurangzeb, 1660-1666

Guido van Meersbergen

Introduction

At daybreak on 13 August 1662, in the midst of Northern India's monsoon season, the Dutch envoy Dircq van Adrichem (1629-1665) made his way to Delhi's Hall of Public Audience (*Diwan-i-Am* or *Am-Khas* to appear before Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), the reigning Mughal emperor. As the heavy rain, which had commenced the previous night, continued unabated, the envoy and his modest entourage faced the difficult task of reaching the imperial palace without soaking their clothes and spoiling the gifts they carried. Failing to appear at the appointed time would harm the interests of his employer, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC), hence Van Adrichem steered his horses, carts, and palanquins through Delhi's mud-covered streets. Having entered the Red Fort, the ambassador was brought to Iftikhar Khan, the imperial stable master (*Akhtah Begi*) on whom the Dutch relied for assistance. After about half an hour, news reached Van Adrichem that the bad weather compelled Aurangzeb to stay indoors. The monarch was still recovering from the illness that had struck him some months earlier.¹ This scenario repeated itself twice over the next month, so that it was not until mid-September that the envoy obtained the desired first audience, five weeks after arriving in Delhi.²

¹ A. J. Bernet Kempers (ed.), *Journal van Dircq van Adrichem's Hofreis naar den Groot-Mogol Aurangzēb 1662* (The Hague, 1941) (*Journal*), pp. 130-1.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 144-8, 160-2. See also J. A. van der Chijs et al. (eds.), *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India*, 31 vols. (The Hague/Batavia, 1887-1931) (*DRB*), 1663, pp. 294-306. This embassy is also discussed in Frank Birkenholz' contribution to this volume.

By analysing Van Adrichem's embassy to the court of Aurangzeb, this chapter sheds light on three inter-related aspects: cross-cultural diplomacy, the significance of merchants as interlocutors in early modern inter-state relations and the VOC's place in the Mughal political landscape. The picture that emerges from Van Adrichem's embassy journal is not that of inter-state diplomacy based on reciprocal exchange. The diplomat made no attempt to assert his sovereign's right to be treated as an equal member in a society of princes, as did, for example, the English ambassadors Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris during their missions to the Mughal court.³ As symbolized by the repeated deferral of the envoy's audience, the Dutch in Mughal India ranked low as diplomatic partners. Yet as armed merchants dwelling in Mughal domains they were familiar with imperial politics and culture in a way that royal ambassadors arriving from Europe were not.⁴ By examining how Dutch missions were embedded in a larger configuration of social and political interactions at international, regional and local levels, the VOC's idiosyncratic position in Mughal India as inhabiting a grey area between minor foreign power and unorthodox domestic player becomes clear.

This essay uses the term 'merchant-diplomat' to highlight the distinctive role of commercial agents in structuring exchanges between early modern polities, underscoring the significance of non-ambassadorial actors brought to light by the New Diplomatic History. The greater facility with which merchants could operate in diplomatic settings in the absence of, or unrestrained by, formalised inter-state relations and their accompanying protocol has been

³ W. Foster (ed.), *The embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-1619: as narrated in his journal and correspondence* (London, 1926), pp. 139-40; H. Das, S. C. Sarkar (eds.), *The Norris embassy to Aurangzib (1699-1702)* (Calcutta, 1959), pp. 272-3,

emphasized by a number of recent studies and was already recognized by contemporaries.⁵ As Roe informed the East India Company (EIC) in 1616, a ‘meaner agent’ was likely to carry out diplomacy in Mughal India more effectively than he could himself without running the risk of compromising the honour of his sovereign.⁶ The corporations the merchants served have also received new attention as diplomatic actors, either as state-like organizations acting by proxy, or as states in their own right.⁷ As a recent argument has it, corporations such as the VOC ‘proved more agile transnational interlocutors than the states who authorized them because of their ability to become willing tributaries to foreign states’.⁸ Extending the gaze to Asia and fully integrating trading companies into the broad spectrum of state and non-state actors engaged in diplomatic exchange has clear potential for further enriching the inclusive perspectives on the transcultural ‘co-production’ of early modern diplomatic practices recently elaborated in the Mediterranean context.⁹ The VOC’s multifaceted diplomatic relations reveal how European merchant-diplomats adapted to and were incorporated into a set of distinct yet partially overlapping diplomatic networks, from posing as indigenized

⁵ For other examples, see J. E. Wills Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese envoys to K’ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); L. Blussé, ‘Peeking into the empires: Dutch embassies to the courts of China and Japan’, *Itinerario*, 37.3 (2013), 13-29.

⁶ Foster, *Embassy*, p. 310.

⁷ For the latter, see P. J. Stern, *The company-state: corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011). Also see Birkenholz’ chapter.

⁸ W. A. Pettigrew, ‘Corporate constitutionalism and the dialogue between the global and the local in seventeenth-century English history’, *Itinerario*, 39.3 (2015), 490.

⁹ M. van Gelder, T. Krstić, ‘Introduction: Cross-confessional diplomacy and diplomatic intermediaries in the early modern Mediterranean’, *JEMH*, 19.2-3 (2015), 103. “Co-production” stresses the contributions made by a diverse range of actors to the wider development of diplomatic cultures.

‘merchant-kings’ in the Indonesian Archipelago to being subordinated as ‘obedient servant[s]’ in Tokugawa Japan.¹⁰

Van Adrichem’s embassy reached Delhi in the midst of an extraordinary spell of diplomatic activity following the Mughal war of succession of 1657-1659. In the space of five years (1660-1665), envoys from Basra, Balkh, Bukhara, Kashgar, Persia, Mecca, Yemen, Hadhramaut, and Abyssinia made their appearance at Aurangzeb’s court, while two French envoys arrived in 1666. This unique confluence of diplomatic missions invites us to compare Van Adrichem’s conduct and reception to those of other foreign envoys. Dutch diplomatic materials have long been relatively neglected even by VOC historians, and until now Van Adrichem’s mission remains primarily studied through the accounts of François Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and Niccolao Manucci.¹¹ The analysis in this chapter rests on a contextual reading of Van Adrichem’s embassy journal and related documentation, which will be examined alongside the accounts of the aforementioned travellers and the principal chronicle of Aurangzeb’s reign, the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* of Muhammad Saqi Must’ad Khan.¹²

¹⁰ L. Blussé, ‘Queen among kings: diplomatic ritual in Batavia’, in K. Grijns, P. J. M. Nas (eds.), *Jakarta-Batavia: socio-cultural essays* (Leiden, 2000), p. 31; A. Clulow, *The company and the Shogun: The Dutch encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York, 2014), p. 18.

¹¹ See for instance A. Flüchter, ‘Der Herrscher grüßen? Grußpraktiken bei Audienzen am Mogolhof im europäischen Diskurs der Frühen Neuzeit’, in P. Burschel, C. Vogel (eds.), *Die Audienz: Ritualisierten Kulturkontakt in der frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, 2014), pp. 17-56. Also see the confused analysis in G. Z. Refai, ‘Foreign embassies to Aurangzeb’s court at Delhi, 1661-65’, in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Delhi through the ages: essays in urban history, culture, and society* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 192-204.

¹² M. Sāqī Musta‘idd Khān, *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri: A history of the Emperor Aurangzib-‘Alamgir (reign 1658-1707 A.D.) of Sāqī Must’ad Khan*, ed. J. Sarkar (Calcutta, 1947). Completed in 1710, for the first decade of Aurangzeb’s reign it relies on the *Alamgir-namah*, composed shortly after the events.

Seen through a comparative lens, the various embassies to Aurangzeb's court provide an exceptional testing ground for hypotheses regarding early modern cross-cultural diplomacy.

A previous generation of scholarship envisaged Mughal-European diplomatic encounters as hampered by misunderstanding and semiotic disconnect, in short as characterized by cultural incommensurability.¹³ The structuralist conception of culture as an internally-coherent and closed-off system of signs, which underlies this interpretation, has been rejected by recent commentators.¹⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam has cogently argued that the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires 'belonged to overlapping cultural zones', while early modern South Asian and European actors could create sufficient degrees of commensurability for cultural transfer to take place and relations to be mediated.¹⁵ Van Adrichem's embassy substantiates the thesis of commensurability in Asian-European diplomatic exchange. Indeed, to analyse VOC diplomacy solely using the binary vocabulary of East-West encounters would be to miss the point that the Company's diplomatic profile was constituted through, and deeply embedded in, the various diplomatic circuits dotting the Indian Ocean space.

The Dutch Merchant-Diplomat in Mughal India

The VOC's presence in Mughal India originated in the early years of the seventeenth century and obtained a firmer footing during the latter half of Jahangir's reign (1605-1627). By the

¹³ B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), p.18; K. Teltscher, *India inscribed: European and British writing on India 1600-1800* (Delhi, 1995), p. 21.

¹⁴ C. Windler, 'Diplomatic history as a field for cultural analysis: Muslim-Christian relations in Tunis, 1700-1840', *HJ*, 44.1 (2001), 94; P. Burschel, 'Einleitung', in P. Burschel, C. Vogel (eds.), *Die Audienz: Ritualisierten Kulturkontakt in der frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, 2014), pp. 11-12; S. Subrahmanyam, *Courtly encounters: translating courtliness and violence in early modern Eurasia* (Cambridge MA, 2012), pp. 23, 30;

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7, 209.

1630s, Dutch trading operations were up and running throughout the western province of Gujarat and in the northern region around Agra, while the first inroads had been made further eastward in Bengal.¹⁶ For the right to establish factories, the settlement of import and export duties, and legal protection in Mughal domains, the Company depended on agreements with local governors and the central government. On their part, the Mughal administration benefited from increased tax income resulting from commercial expansion in its ports as well as from the influx of precious metals and foreign luxury goods. In addition, regulating relations with the various European ‘merchant-warriors’ was a means to curtail their predatory tendencies on the high seas and hence extend protection to Mughal subjects beyond the direct reach of the empire’s military power.¹⁷ This set of conditions formed the backdrop to all Mughal-Dutch diplomatic interactions. A crucial difference with Dutch diplomacy in North Africa and the Levant is that Dutch envoys in Mughal India and other parts of the Indian Ocean world acted on behalf of the VOC’s governor-general in Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), not the States-General of the United Provinces.¹⁸ Rather than aiming to establish

¹⁶ H. Terpstra, *De Opkomst der Westerkwartieren van de Oost-Indische Compagnie (Suratte, Arabië, Perzië)* (The Hague, 1918); H. W. van Santen, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1620-1660* (Meppel, 1982).

¹⁷ The phrase is borrowed from: G. Winius, M. P. M. Vink, *The merchant-warrior pacified: the VOC (The Dutch East India Company) and its changing political economy in India* (Delhi, 1991). The Mughal government’s ability to curtail European predations remained partial, yet less ineffective than is sometimes suggested. See A. Clulow, ‘European maritime violence and territorial states in early modern Asia, 1600-1650’, *Itinerario*, 33.3 (2009), 72-94. Compare: O. Prakash, *The new Cambridge history of India II.5: European commercial enterprise in pre-colonial India* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 143-6.

¹⁸ The VOC’s rights to independently carry on diplomatic negotiations, engage in warfare, and sign treaties with Asian rulers devolved from its founding charter granted by the States-General in March 1602. Even so, as discussed by Birkenholz in this volume, during the opening decades of the seventeenth century the States-General and princes of Orange did occasionally participate in diplomatic communications with Asian rulers. On

bilateral treaties or contractual obligations – which would have been both foreign and offensive to the Mughal geopolitical outlook – the Dutch willingly posed as supplicants to the emperor soliciting his imperial commands (*farmans*).¹⁹ Such edicts were addressed to Mughal officials and other local power holders, and stipulated the privileges accorded to the ‘Dutch nation’ as a corporate group living within the Mughal realm, an arrangement similar to the rights enjoyed by European communities in Ottoman lands as expressed in the Sultan’s *ahdnames*.²⁰

In practice the durability and weight of the emperor’s ‘irrefutable commands’ had various limitations.²¹ The stipulations contained in a *farman* remained in force only until a new one superseded it. This circumstance led to considerable chagrin among European Company officials, although few commentators were as cynical as the English factors in Ahmadabad who sneered about ‘this Kinges firmaunes that hee gives when hee is drunck and denyes when hee is sober’.²² Since *farmans* expressed the will of the reigning monarch, they formally lost

Dutch diplomacy in the Mediterranean see A. De Groot, *The Ottoman Empire and the Dutch Republic: a history of the earliest diplomatic relations, 1610-1630* (Leiden, 1978); M. Van Gelder, ‘The republic’s renegades: Dutch converts to Islam in seventeenth-century diplomatic relations with north Africa’, *JEMH*, 19.2-3 (2015), 175-98.

¹⁹ B.G. Fragner, ‘*Farmān*’, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, online edition, 1999, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farman>, accessed 29 March 2016.

²⁰ D. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 183-8. For the text of *farmans* pertaining to Van Adrichem’s mission: J. E. Heeres, F. W. Stapel (eds.), *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum: Verzameling van Politieke Contracten en verdere Verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten gesloten, van Privilegiebrieven, aan hen verleend, enz.*, 6 vols. (The Hague, 1907-1955), II, pp. 215-226. For ‘Nederlandse natie’, see p. 217

²¹ *Ibid.*, II.223.

²² W. Foster (ed.), *The English Factories in India 1618-1621 [to] 1668-1669. A calendar of documents in the India Office, British Museum and Public Record Office*, 13 vols. (Oxford, 1906-1927) (*EFI*), 1618-1621, p. 347.

their validity as soon as a new ruler succeeded to the throne. The need to have up-to-date decrees at their disposal when dealing with local authorities following imperial successions or conquest is what induced the VOC to fit out the embassies led by Van Adrichem (1662), Joannes Bacherus (1689), and Joan Josua Ketelaar (1711-1713). Yet their diplomatic efforts did not stop there, as the degree to which magistrates complied with the provisions made in *farmans* varied considerably. Complaints about this state of affairs were a recurring theme in VOC as well as EIC correspondence, such as in 1635, when the provincial governor of Bengal denied the VOC free trade under his jurisdiction in spite of Shah Jahan's newly-granted *farman*.²³ It was on account of their grievances with regard to being 'vexed' by lower-tier officials in their pursuit of profit that the bulk of VOC diplomacy in Mughal India was aimed at settling disputes that had originated at the local and provincial levels.

While having direct access to court was an important lever in negotiations with lower-level administrators, the Dutch played this trump card relatively sparingly because of the time and costs it required and their scepticism about the enforceability of imperial decrees. In December 1657, when rumours about Shah Jahan's indisposition had already reached the VOC's *Hoge Regering* (High Government) in Batavia, its members voiced their opinion that it was more profitable for the Company to win the favour of lesser magistrates than to lobby at the imperial court.²⁴ Indeed, when looking back on their commissioning of Van Adrichem in August 1662, Joan Maetsuycker and his Councillors wrote that they would have shunned a mission if it had not been for the Mughal succession, emphasising that maintaining good working relations at the local level remained key: 'no matter how favourable the king's

²³ See *DRB 1636*, 123.

²⁴ W. P. Coolhaas, J. van Goor, H. K. s'Jacob (eds.), *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, 13 vols. (The Hague, 1960-2007), II.171, 190.

farmans obtained for the Company, ministers both high and low want to be acknowledged for obeying them'.²⁵ In Bengal in particular, the Mughal viceroy (*subahdar*, often carrying the honorific title of *nawab*) held such power that most political negotiations were conducted at the provincial level. In addition to periodic formal gift offerings at the provincial court, the Company's resident in Dakha paid informal visits to the *subahdar* perhaps as often as once a week, while everyday dealings were entrusted to unofficial intermediaries such as Dutch surgeons in Mughal service.²⁶ One gets an impression of what provincial diplomacy might have looked like on the imposing canvas of the VOC's factory in Hugli painted by Hendrik van Schuylenburgh (Fig. 9.1). It is now increasingly becoming clear that the prominence of day-to-day informal diplomacy was due at least in part to the fact that many European traders and Mughal government officials were entangled in mutually-beneficial local alliances across cultural and institutional lines.²⁷

<FIGURE 9.1 HERE>

The frequency of Dutch representations at the emperor's abode was certainly much less. It may be presumed that Tavernier's reference to 'deputations and presents' which the Dutch and English were 'obliged to make every year at court' reflected prescribed rather than actual practice.²⁸ When the *opperkoopman* (senior merchant) Jan Tack made his appearance in

²⁵ *Journal*, 27.

²⁶ *DRB 1661*, p. 240.

²⁷ F. Hasan, 'Conflict and cooperation in Anglo-Mughal trade relations during the reign of Aurangzeb', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 34.4 (1991), 351-60; B. Sur, 'Institutional interests under the institutional façade: local agency in the Dutch East India Company's legal system in 17th-century Bengal, *Itinerario* (forthcoming). Compare the argument about trans-imperial elite familiarity in David do Paço's contribution to this volume.

²⁸ J.-B. Tavernier, *Travels in India*, trans. V. Ball, ed. W. Crooke, 2 vols. (London, 1925), I.7.

recently completed Shahjahanabad in 1648, he was told by his patron at court, Haqiqat Khan, that ‘a king such as Shah Jahan merits more than one visit every three or four years’, hinting at the VOC’s sporadic attendance in years past.²⁹ The nobleman recommended that the Dutch should present the emperor with fine pieces of broadcloth annually, yet such regularity was never met. For the thirty years prior to Van Adrichem’s mission, nine Dutch delegations to the Mughal court have been identified, namely those headed by Marcus Oldenburgh (1633), François Timmers (1635), Cornelis Weylandt (1642), Nicolaes Verburgh (1646), Jan Tack (1648, 1650, 1656, and 1660), and Johan Berckhout (1653).³⁰ It is evident that Tack, who also participated as right-hand man in the expeditions of Weylandt, Verburgh, and Van Adrichem, was a key figure in the VOC’s diplomatic activity during his twenty-eight year-long stay in Agra. Van Adrichem’s embassy was followed by a lull in Dutch diplomacy at the imperial court, which coincided with Tack’s death in January 1663. During Aurangzeb’s long reign, the VOC dispatched only two further missions led by a Dutch agent, in 1677 and 1689.³¹

What set Van Adrichem’s *hofreis* or court journey apart from all previous VOC delegations was its stately character and elaborate degree of organisation. Whereas seventeenth-century VOC diplomacy in the Mughal Empire was virtually always of an ad-hoc nature, carried out by one or two low-status envoys and coordinated by the Company’s administration in India itself, Van Adrichem travelled to Delhi as the director of Dutch trade in Surat and at the head of an embassy commissioned directly from Batavia. Having awaited the arrival of the ships

²⁹ Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 1.04.02 (VOC), 1168, fo. 627r.

³⁰ Manuscript journals are available for the 1648, 1653, and 1656 missions: VOC 1168, 1201, 1210. For the other deputations, see VOC 1113, 1141, 1161; *Corpus Diplomaticum*, I.268-9; *Journal*, pp. 4-11.

³¹ Both missions were led by Joannes Bacherus. See VOC 1323, 1329, 1475 and 1510.

carrying Japanese lacquer, Arabian horses, and other gifts for the emperor, Van Adrichem commenced his journey from Surat to Delhi on 22 May 1662.³²

To appreciate the role and status of the Dutch merchant-diplomats in Mughal India, Van Adrichem's courtly venture should be regarded in the light of local Mughal-Dutch interactions. The Mughal war of succession had profound implications for the VOC in Gujarat and Bengal, as the crisis of imperial power at the centre produced fragmentation of authority locally. Whenever possible the VOC steered a course of neutrality, seeking to maintain the favour of power-holders nearby without exasperating the latter's rivals further afield. Yet because the Company possessed two highly sought-after assets – money and armaments – it proved impossible to remain entirely on the sidelines. The plunder of the Dutch factory in Dhaka in 1659 in retaliation for material support offered to one of the warring parties represents just one of the possible repercussions of the VOC's involvement as a commercial-political actor in the Mughal political landscape.³³

Another concrete consequence was Aurangzeb's appeal to the Dutch for assistance in seizing his fugitive brother, Shah Shuja.³⁴ If this request was turned down politely on the pretext that capturing princes was no business for traders, there were other occasions on which the land-based empire did successfully co-opt the ambulant power of the merchant corporation. Such was the case with Aurangzeb's call for maritime assistance against the Portuguese town of Daman on the west-Indian coast, issued in 1660. The *Hoge Regering* decided to supply warships for the purpose and capitalized on the issue in the diplomatic letter delivered by Van

³² *Journaal*, pp. 36-8.

³³ *Generale Missiven*, III.291, 300-2.

³⁴ *Journaal*, p. 17.

Adrichem, although the scheme eventually failed to materialize.³⁵ As in the case of joint Mughal-Dutch operations that did come to pass – such as the modest naval support which the VOC supplied to *nawab* Shaista Khan in his campaign against Arakan (1665-1666) – Aurangzeb's request regarding Daman is probably best seen as an appeal to a subordinate political actor to assist in frontier policing.³⁶ Indeed, the available evidence suggests that members of the Mughal political elite viewed the various groups of armed European traders as minor political actors who represented a military potential to be restrained and if possible co-opted. The way Aurangzeb responded to the VOC's request for reimbursement of costs incurred while preparing for the aborted campaign is indicative of the asymmetrical terms in which the diplomatic relationship was couched. The Dutch were told that the emperor recognized the service they rendered to him, but that they should regard it as compensation for the commercial favours they were liberally enjoying.³⁷ The ceremonial framing of the VOC as a semi-domesticated foreign tributary by the Mughal government, and the symbolic assumption of this role by the Dutch, comes clearly to the fore when reading Van Adrichem's mission against other diplomatic deputations to Aurangzeb's court during the same period.

Embassies to Aurangzeb's Court (1660-1666)

After his first audience in Delhi was postponed for a second time, Van Adrichem turned to the young nobleman Sultan Muhammad to voice his discontent. Convinced that a speedier dispatch of his business should be possible, the Dutch envoy pointed out that he was well aware that Qasim Aqa, the ambassador from Basra on the Persian Gulf, had been promptly allowed to salute Aurangzeb and present his master's gifts. Moreover, Van Adrichem

³⁵ *DRB 1661*, pp. 5-6, 156, 287.

³⁶ For Shaista Khan's campaign see J. Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib: mainly based on Persian sources*, 5 vols. (Calcutta, 1912-1924), III.133-41.

³⁷ *Journal*, p. 187.

continued, the emperor had received Qasim Aqa with considerable honour and courtesy, even if Husain Pasha, the semi-autonomous Ottoman governor of Basra, ‘could not contribute the least bit to the reputation of the Mughal crown, expansion of commerce in Surat, or the growth of the imperial treasury’.³⁸ Whilst betraying an obvious mercantile bias as well as a limited appreciation of the repute and legitimacy that accrued to Aurangzeb’s reign through the public paying of respects by representatives from neighbouring Islamic regions, Van Adrichem’s comparison of the treatment received by the Dutch party with that accorded to other diplomats at the Mughal court is worth pursuing. The fact that we possess an exceptional archival record regarding a variety of diplomatic missions taking place at roughly the same historical juncture offers a unique opportunity to analyse European merchant-diplomacy through a comparative and cross-cultural lens.

According to Bernier, who served as a physician at the Mughal court in the 1660s, ‘little or no respect was paid’ to Qasim Aqa, while Manucci, who had served as a gunner in Prince Dara Shukoh’s army, recalled that the Basran embassy ‘made no great stir’.³⁹ While the honours received by Qasim Aqa were modest indeed when seen in the light of the elaborate reception of Safavid ambassadors, the travellers’ remarks should be read in context. The *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* of Muhammad Saqi Must’ad Khan, the principal chronicle of Aurangzeb’s reign, states that Husain Pasha’s envoy received an allowance of 4,000 rupees in Surat to facilitate his journey to Delhi, 5,000 rupees and a robe of honour (*khil’at* or *sarapa*) at his reception at court, as well as a further 12,000 rupees, a robe of honour, and a jewelled sword for his

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁹ F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, trans. A. Constable, ed. V. Smith (London, 1914), p. 133; N. Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India 1653-1708 by Niccolao Manucci Venetian*, ed. W. Irvine, 4 vols. (London, 1907-1908), II.115. given the page range you cited earlier, should this be 151? No, p. 115 is correct. I must have overlooked it when compiling the other footnote.

master upon his departure.⁴⁰ In contrast, Van Adrichem received no financial allowance from the Mughal ruler, nor was he escorted to court like most of his west and central Asian counterparts, although he was given lodgings in Delhi and presented with several gifts. That the allegiance of a former Ottoman governor was of greater interest to Aurangzeb than the visit of a VOC envoy is demonstrated by the fact that, when Husain Pasha decided to migrate to Mughal India in 1669, he was escorted from Sirhind in the Punjab to Delhi, where he was graciously received in the *Ghusl-Khana* (Hall of Private Audience), offered a *lakh* (100,000) of rupees besides other gifts, and admitted into imperial service as a high-ranking officer.⁴¹

The latter example has been discussed by Subrahmanyam to illustrate the relative ease with which a figure like Husain Pasha could move between the Islamicate states of Eurasia without encountering evident problems in adjusting to local forms of courtly ceremony and imperial administration.⁴² Although stemming from a cultural and diplomatic background that was evidently different from the Indo-Islamic point of view, as *firangis* ('Franks' or Europeans) the Dutch in India formed part of a clearly recognisable group within the seventeenth-century Mughal political landscape. Furthermore, as longer-term residents with everyday experience in dealing with the imperial administration from a position of relative weakness, Company envoys had a fair grasp of Mughal social and political etiquette and relatively few reservations about adapting to local conventions. Finally, as has been established for a number of different contexts, multiple structural commonalities and 'interconnected repertoires' existed between

⁴⁰ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, pp. 20-2.

⁴¹ N. S. Shāh Nawāz Khān, A. Hayy, *The Maāthir-ul-Umarā: Being biographies of the Muhammadan and Hindu officers of the Timurid sovereigns of India from 1500 to about 1780 A.D.*, trans. H. Beveridge, ed. B. Prashad, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1911-1952), I.698-700. A second account places Husain Pasha's reception in Agra: *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, pp. 54-5.

⁴² Subrahmanyam, *Courtly encounters*, pp. 6-7.

court cultures across Eurasia, enabling diplomatic actors to recognize and engage with (if not always fully appreciate) one another's ceremonial language and symbolic practices.⁴³ To assess the Dutch position within the diplomatic world of Mughal India, let us first turn towards this wider context.

Having seized the throne through a fratricidal war fought during his father's lifetime, Aurangzeb was keen to receive recognition of his accession through congratulatory embassies from neighbouring states.⁴⁴ The main diplomatic partners of the Mughal Empire during Shah Jahan's reign (r. 1628-1658) had been the Uzbek khanates of Bukhara and Balkh to the north and Safavid Iran to the northwest, in line with the empire's primary geopolitical interests.⁴⁵ Besides regular interactions with states on the Indian Subcontinent, principally the Deccan sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda, the Mughals also maintained intermittent diplomatic contacts with the Ottoman Sultan. During Aurangzeb's fifty-year-long reign, the only consistent factor in Mughal diplomacy was the relationship with the Uzbek states in central Asia, the ancestral domains of the Timurid dynasty and the location of Shah Jahan's failed campaigns of the 1640s. Diplomatic exchange with the more distant Ottomans was limited to one unreciprocated embassy sent from Istanbul in 1690, while official relations with Persia broke off in 1666, when Aurangzeb received an insulting letter from Shah Abbas II.⁴⁶ These

⁴³ P. F. Bang, D. Kolodziejczyk, "'Elephant of India': universal empire through time and across cultures", in P. F. Bang, D. Kolodziejczyk (eds.), *Universal empire: a comparative approach to imperial culture and representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 25.

⁴⁴ R. Islam, *Indo-Persian relations: a study of the political and diplomatic relations between the Mughul Empire and Iran* (Teheran, 1970), p. 124; N. R. Farooqi, 'Diplomacy and diplomatic procedure under the Mughals', *The Medieval History Journal*, 7.1 (2004), 59-86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60; Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations*, pp. 112-15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-10, 128-34. For a listing of missions from Central Asia, see Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, III.75.

circumstances make the wave of diplomatic missions attending Aurangzeb's court in the early 1660s all the more remarkable. The most feasible comparison of these embassies, based on the available sources, is at the level of scale, reviewing the degree of material support and honour they received and the value of presents bestowed on them. These variables, which the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* recorded for nearly all embassy parties, provide a fairly transparent yardstick by which to measure the relative importance which the imperial government attributed to its respective diplomatic relationships.

Little is known about the first foreign emissary to present himself at Aurangzeb's court, a man named Ibrahim Beg who was sent by the Uzbek ruler of Balkh, except that he died soon after his arrival in Delhi.⁴⁷ Upon departure his companions were awarded robes of honour and 20,000 rupees in cash. This was many times less than the 150,000 rupees spent on Khushi Bey, the ambassador from Balkh who visited Delhi in 1667, although considerably more than the modest sums granted to a succession of envoys of the Sharif of Mecca on three different occasions between 1665 and 1674.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the envoys from Mecca, like their counterparts from Yemen and Abyssinia, were publicly honoured on festive occasions such as Aurangzeb's lunar birthday and the celebration of the end of Ramadan.⁴⁹ Moreover, Mughal emperors regularly dispatched emissaries to the Arab Peninsula, carrying large financial donations to the Holy Cities, amounting to as much as 660,000 rupees in 1662, when

⁴⁷ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, p. 20. There is some discrepancy in the order of appearance of the various envoys as recorded by Saqi Must'ad Khan, Bernier, and Manucci. The former source will be followed here.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 20, 32, 41, 48, 67, 87. The sums mentioned were (in rupees): 6,000 in 1665, 9,000 in 1668, and 5,000 in 1674. In 1671 Shaikh Usman is said to have received 10,000 rupees besides 20,000 for the Sharif: N. R. Farooqi, 'Mughal-Ottoman relations: a study of political and diplomatic relations between Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire, 1556-1748', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison (1986), 212.

⁴⁹ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, pp. 32, 67.

Aurangzeb successfully solicited the Sharif's recognition of his reign.⁵⁰ While the immediate geopolitical significance of diplomatic contacts with the minor states across the Arabian Sea was smaller than that of relations with his territorial rivals on India's northern and western frontiers, such largesse was of evident importance to Aurangzeb in establishing his public image as a benefactor of Islam.

Compared with their counterparts from the lesser khanate of Balkh, envoys from Bukhara received somewhat higher favours at Aurangzeb's court. Khwaja Ahmad, the envoy of Abdul Aziz Khan who arrived in November 1661, was met in the environs of Delhi by Saif Khan, court favourite and governor of the capital, and conducted into the *Am-Khas*, the splendid Hall of Public Audience constructed by Shah Jahan (Fig 9.2).⁵¹ A total of 120,000 rupees was expended on Khwaja Ahmad's entertainment during his three-month stay, and in 1667 two *lakhs* were spent on his successor Rustam Bey. Aurangzeb also sent his own ambassadors in return, such as Mustafa Khan who was dispatched in June 1664 with presents worth 150,000 rupees for Abdul Aziz Khan and 100,000 rupees for Subhan Quli Khan, respectively.⁵² In keeping with imperial protocol, the Uzbek ambassadors were ushered into the royal presence by an official appointed for the purpose. They were required to perform the Mughal act of obedience known as *taslim*; placing one's right hand on the ground and then raising it gently and placing it on one's head, a gesture expressing submission to imperial authority.⁵³ The diplomatic letter they carried was taken from their hands by an *amir* (high-ranking nobleman)

⁵⁰ Farooqi, 'Mughal-Ottoman relations', 211.

⁵¹ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, p. 21. See E. Koch, 'Diwan-i' Aam and Chihil Sutun: the audience halls of Shah Jahan', *Muqarnas*, 11 (1994), 143-65.

⁵² *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, pp. 22-3, 31, 41; *Maāthir-ul-Umarā*, II.683-5.

⁵³ Abū al-Faẓl ibn Mubārak, *The Ain i Akbari by Abul Fazl 'Allami, translated from the original Persian*, trans. H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1873-1891), I.158.

who then delivered it to the emperor or read out its contents to him.⁵⁴ Only the Persian ambassador Budaq Beg is said to have been allowed to present his sovereign's letter directly to Aurangzeb, who reportedly raised it above his head as a particular mark of respect before consulting its contents.⁵⁵

<FIGURE 9.2 HERE>

The welcome given to Budaq Beg was the grandest reception accorded to any ambassador to India during Aurangzeb's reign. From the moment he crossed the Safavid-Mughal border, provincial governors fêted the envoy. Outside Delhi he was warmly received by prominent courtiers who conducted him towards the *Am-Khas*.⁵⁶ As powerful political rivals sharing close cultural and historic ties, the Mughals and Safavids turned ambassadorial exchanges into conspicuous displays of opulence and refinement. Such diplomatic trials of strength often contained barely concealed attempts to attain symbolic precedence, such as when Shah Abbas II in his letter to Aurangzeb referred to the assistance that his ancestor Shah Tahmasp had given to the exiled Mughal emperor Humayun over a century earlier.⁵⁷ The large amounts of gifts which both parties exchanged were intended as expressions of their masters' power and prosperity.⁵⁸ In 1661, the presents brought from Iran included sixty-six horses and a pearl weighing thirty-seven carats, representing a total value of 422,000 rupees. On his part,

⁵⁴ Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 117-18.

⁵⁵ This claim, made by Bernier (*Travels*, pp. 119, 147), has been accepted by modern authorities: Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations*, pp. 125-6; Farooqi, 'Diplomacy', 84.

⁵⁶ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ Islam, *Indo-Persian relations*, p. 125

⁵⁸ Farooqi, 'Diplomacy', 81.

Aurangzeb bestowed an elaborate set of items worth 535,000 rupees on Budaq Beg, and two years later sent an embassy to Isfahan with presents worth as much as seven *lakhs*.⁵⁹

Van Adrichem's embassy did not come close to these dimensions. As discussed in detail in Birkenholz's contribution, the Dutch presented Arabian horses, fine textiles, sword blades, birds of paradise, and an extensive variety of Japanese lacquer works and other rarities.⁶⁰ The combined value of gifts to Aurangzeb and a range of courtiers and officials nevertheless did not exceed 27,500 guilders, out of a total expenditure of some 63,500 guilders (or around 53,000 rupees) on the mission as a whole.⁶¹ It is clear that the Dutch merchant-diplomats could not and would not compete on the level of royalty, which also would not have been expected from representatives of a minor political player with ambiguous sovereign credentials. All the same, the Company consciously selected its gifts in accordance with Mughal custom and elite tastes, demonstrating its understanding of local conventions while showcasing its distinctive character as a supplier of exotic luxury goods. Although relatively few in number and excluding cash sums, the gifts bestowed on Van Adrichem also unquestionably belonged to the classic Mughal repertoire; they included horses, jewelled daggers, and robes of honour.⁶² A number of discrepancies notwithstanding – principally the lack of reciprocity in Mughal-Dutch diplomatic exchange – Van Adrichem's embassy therefore to an important extent resembled those of other political actors in the Indian Ocean world.

⁵⁹ *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, pp. 21-2, 29.

⁶⁰ See below pp. N-NN.

⁶¹ *Journaal*, pp. 54, 59, 162, 176.

⁶² M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966), pp. 139-44.

The Question of Commensurability

The profound differences between Van Adrichem's reception and that of Budaq Beg had less to do with cultural differences or the incommensurability of diplomatic traditions than with concrete interests of state. Once the merchant-diplomat obtained his impatiently-awaited audience, his treatment followed standard Mughal practice and resembled that of other representatives of smaller powers, such as the Uzbeks. Nor did the Dutchman appear out of place or hesitant about the role he was expected to perform. Before coming to court, Van Adrichem had solicited letters of recommendation from Surat's governor Mustafa Khan and the governor of Ahmedabad, Makramat Khan.⁶³ In Delhi, the ambassador and his broker Kishan Das were closely advised by a small number of courtiers, principally the *ahadi* Sultan Muhammad and the *Akthah Begi* Iftikhar Khan. The latter served as liaison with *wazirs* Raja Raghunath and Fazil Khan, and he appears to have been put in charge of entertaining the embassy party.⁶⁴ Iftikhar Khan had aided VOC affairs as early as 1648, while his father, the late Asalat Khan, had been an important patron of the Dutch since the 1630s.⁶⁵ While Company agents could thus tap into an archive of past experiences; the Mughal administration also drew upon a well-established prior frame of reference. Upon hearing of the arrival of the Dutch party, Fazil Khan first inquired after the late Joan Berckhout, before calling up Tack to clarify Van Adrichem's status in relation to his predecessors. Being satisfied that the current ambassador was commissioned directly by the *Hoge Regering*, Fazil Khan proceeded to arrange his reception accordingly.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Journaal*, pp. 87-91.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 176. For the *wazirs* see C. M. Agrawal, *Wazirs of Aurangzeb* (Bodh-Gaya, 1978), pp. 46-50.

⁶⁵ For Iftikhar Khan (Sultan Husain)'s assistance to Jan Tack, see VOC 1168, fos. 626r-638v.

⁶⁶ *Journaal*, pp. 132-6.

Van Adrichem obtained his first audience on 14 September 1662. Returning from a two-week retreat outside Delhi, the emperor announced that he would receive the envoy that evening when holding court in the *Ghusl-Khana*. Iftikhar Khan called the small Dutch company into the square in front of the audience hall and ensured that the horses and other gifts were lined up in the same place. Being instructed to enter, Van Adrichem, the merchant (*koopman*) Joan Elpen, and the secretary Fernandinus de Laver 'humbly offered the required obedience after this country's fashion', and presented the Persian and Dutch copies of Maetsuycker's letter to one of Aurangzeb's confidants, who conveyed them into the emperor's hands. Unlike the epistle carried by Budaq Beg, the VOC's letters were neither opened nor read in the presence of the ambassador. The diplomatic gifts having been shown from a distance, the three Dutchmen were dressed in honorific attire and once again went through the set procedures of expressing gratitude according to imperial protocol, before obtaining license to depart.⁶⁷ Three more presentations of gifts followed over the following weeks, each time in the *Am-Khas*, before Van Adrichem was granted his departure audience on 22 October.

This final audience is most instructive about Van Adrichem's participation in two key Mughal ceremonies. Once Aurangzeb's appearance on the throne was announced by the sound of kettle-drums and other musical instruments, Van Adrichem joined the other attendees in the *Am-Khas* in doing reverence to the emperor before each took their appointed place. As the positioning in Mughal audience halls was spatially stratified according to rank, it is regrettable that Van Adrichem's secretary did not note down his exact spot. However, from a previous audience we know that the ambassador was made to stand in the section lined by a red wooden railing which was preserved for medium to low-ranked *mansabdars* (office-holders), while he was only called up into the area within the silver fence that was the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1601.

preserve of high-ranking nobles during the presentation of his gifts.⁶⁸ After informing the emperor about the VOC's request, Fazil Khan took Van Adrichem by the hand and led him to the place for the dressing in robes of honour. Clad in the *sarapa*, the envoy took position in the *Am-Khas* in front of the stairs facing the throne, 'four times bringing his hand from the earth to his head'.⁶⁹ This manner of saluting, in the words of Akbar's *wazir* Abul Fazl, signified that the person 'is ready to give himself as an offering'.⁷⁰ As the audience unfolded, Iftikhar Khan placed a jewelled dagger (*khanjar*) on Van Adrichem's head and the reins of a horse with a gilded saddle around his neck. Upon receiving each item the ambassador went through the routine of *taslim* four times in succession, as he did a fourth time when the emperor turned his eyes towards him. Later that day, having received a *farman* from the hands of Fazil Khan, the three Dutch representatives once more performed the prescribed ritual.⁷¹

Of particular interest are the commentaries inserted by De Laver. The secretary emphasized how Aurangzeb had passed the *khanjar* 'from his own hands' to Iftikhar Khan, and pointed out that the emperor focused his gaze intently on the envoy.⁷² The extent to which the importance accorded to the VOC representative might have been inflated is of lesser relevance here than the fact that the Dutch measured the significance of the treatment they received by what they understood to be the standards of their hosts. In their ritual performance as in their written requests, they adhered to the language of submission to imperial authority, a

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164; *DRB 1663*, pp. 296-8. On the spatial organisation of Delhi's *Diwan-i-Am*, see S. P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: the sovereign city in Mughal India, 1639-1739* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 92; Koch, 'Diwan-i'Am and Chihul Sutun'.

⁶⁹ *Journaal*, p. 192.

⁷⁰ Abū al-Fazl, *The Ain i Akbari*, I.158.

⁷¹ *Journaal*, p. 192

⁷² *Ibid.*

compliant stance which was distinctive of (if not exclusive to) merchant-diplomats.⁷³ Like VOC envoys before and after them, Van Adrichem's embassy party displayed no misgivings about accepting robes of honour from the emperor and various nobles, regardless of the implications of authority and service connected with this symbolic act of incorporation.⁷⁴ They offered ceremonial offerings of gold and silver coins (*nazr*) to Aurangzeb, did reverence 'after the Moorish fashion' even when wearing European dress, and 'requested to enjoy the honour of presenting their humble service' to noblemen such as Muhammad Amin Khan, son of Mir Jumla.⁷⁵ The emperor's letter and *khil'at* sent to Batavia were received with highly elaborate public spectacle, while analogous references to humble supplication at the foot of Aurangzeb's throne are found in Maetsuycker's letter to the monarch and in the *farmans* issued in response. The emperor's reminder to Batavia of the protection his *farmans* extended to Maetsuycker's delegates, as long as they comported themselves worthily in their offices, suggests that the reciprocal discourse about service functioned as a means to pacify the Dutch in exchange for commercial privileges.⁷⁶

Further evidence of commensurability is found in a wide variety of situations, ranging from the adoption of social practices to the shared use of generic religious differences. In their letter to Aurangzeb, the members of the *Hoge Regering* wrote that 'God Almighty' had called the monarch to the Mughal throne, and that they prayed that 'the Lord of Heaven and Earth' would abundantly bless both his person and his empire.⁷⁷ Agreeing with the dictum by the Sufi poet Amir Khusrau inscribed on the walls of the *Ghusl-Khana*, De Laver too described

⁷³ See also Windler, 'Diplomatic history', 95; Flüchter, 'Der Herrscher grüßen?' p. 54.

⁷⁴ S. Gordon (ed.), *Robes of honour: khil'at in pre-colonial and colonial India* (New Delhi, 2003).

⁷⁵ *Journaal*, pp. 161, 185.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25; *DRB 1663*, pp. 104-7, 345-7.

⁷⁷ *Journaal*, p. 25.

the palace at Shahjahanabad as an 'earthly paradise'.⁷⁸ No doubt aided by this compatible repertoire of commonplaces, the mediation of difference in Mughal-Dutch encounters took shape through inter-personal relations. Van Adrichem's diplomatic activity included meetings with some of the VOC's long-standing contacts, among others the aged Haqiqat Khan and the former governor of Surat, Raushan Zamir. When the latter visited the Dutch in their lodge in Delhi, they demonstrated their awareness of Mughal social etiquette by presenting him with the traditional parting treat of *pan* (a stimulant prepared of betel leaf with areca nut) and rosewater.⁷⁹ Finally, non-ambassadorial actors played a key role in sustaining diplomatic networks. During Van Adrichem's embassy, a minor yet interesting part was reserved for the German surgeon Jacob Fredrik Baertsch. When the mission ended, Baertsch remained in Delhi to continue his treatment of the nobleman Hoshdar Khan, being expected to use the opportunity to sustain the Dutch lobby through the influence of his new patron.⁸⁰

The final means to evaluate Van Adrichem's mission is to consider it alongside diplomatic representations made on behalf of other merchant corporations. The English East India Company (EIC) chose not to send a congratulatory embassy to Aurangzeb. Having awaited the outcome of the VOC's mission, the directors in London concluded that the gains from procuring new *farmans* were not likely to justify the expenses of a courtly venture.⁸¹ Instead, the English aimed to renew existing privileges through local diplomacy, and in 1664 sent William Blake, the chief factor in Hugli, to *nawab* Shaista Khan's court in Rajmahal.⁸² In contrast, a small French delegation did attend Aurangzeb's court, when François de la

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 177. The famous inscription translates as: 'if there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.'

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

⁸⁰ *DRB 1663*, pp. 305, 426.

⁸¹ *EFI 1661-1664*, pp. 318, 326.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 394-5.

Boullaye le Gouz and Beber, representatives of the French crown and the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* respectively, arrived in Agra in the summer of 1666. Tavernier, who gives the fullest account of this undertaking, describes how it was marred by a lack of familiarity with Mughal court customs and an unwillingness to adjust to foreign protocol. It was Boullaye's foolish insistence on delivering Louis XIV's letter personally to the emperor, the traveller argued, which nearly led to the failure of the mission.⁸³

Tavernier's message was clear: European envoys in Mughal India needed to adjust to local conventions in order to succeed, a position underwritten by Bernier in 1668.⁸⁴ Both men effectively advocated a course of action which VOC envoys such as Van Adrichem had long been practicing. Deftly exploiting the greater range of diplomatic approaches available to them as representatives of an emergent Company-state centred on Batavia, the VOC's merchant-diplomats displayed accommodative stances which contrasted sharply with the more rigid and circumscribed diplomatic conduct of Boullaye's fellow royal ambassadors, Thomas Roe and William Norris.⁸⁵

Conclusion

A focus on the merchant-diplomats representing the Dutch East India Company opens up a significantly different perspective on cross-cultural diplomacy in early modern Asia than the

⁸³ J.-B. Tavernier, *Recueil de plusieurs relations et traités singuliers et curieux de J.B. Tavernier* (Paris, 1679), II.63-70.

⁸⁴ T. Morison (trans.), 'Minute by M. Bernier upon the establishment of trade in the Indies, dated 10th March, 1668', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 65.1 (1933), 1-21.

⁸⁵ For the unsuccessful outcome of both missions, see S. Subrahmanyam, 'Frank submissions: the company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris', in H. V. Bowen et al. (eds.), *The worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 69-96.

picture obtained from existing studies about the occasional royal ambassadors sent from other parts of Europe. Struggling to balance the EIC's interests with his duty to the crown, the Jacobean courtier Thomas Roe had felt notoriously uncomfortable about receiving robes of honour and refused to perform *taslim*.⁸⁶ Yet it was the incompatibility of two concepts of diplomatic honour that dogged the English envoy, not the complete inability to grasp the logics of a different cultural system. By conceiving of VOC diplomacy in Asia as anchored in interactions within the Indian Ocean world, as this chapter has, one is able to move beyond the thesis of cultural incommensurability in Euro-Indian diplomatic exchange.

By approaching embassies not as one-off events but as moments in an on-going diplomatic relationship, one can recognize how courtly encounters were rooted in a complex constellation of political relations at the local level. Van Adrichem and other VOC envoys were relatively familiar with Mughal social and political conventions, well-connected through networks of imperial patronage, and willing to symbolically submit to imperial authority. Free from the burden of upholding the honour of a faraway monarch and representing a foreign yet familiar community which petitioned the emperor following established Mughal procedures, the VOC's merchant-diplomats were readily incorporated into an existing configuration of hierarchic relations on terms set by their powerful hosts. Seen from this angle, the foreign trading company often appears in the shape of a domestic actor, one that could be called upon to perform the duties of a vassal.

Like other non-ambassadorial actors – including the European surgeons and Indian brokers regularly employed by the VOC – merchants played a significant role in inter-state relations. A focus on the merchant-diplomat hence sheds additional light on the wide and flexible range

⁸⁶ Foster, *Embassy*, pp. 87, 214, 294.

of formal and informal means of dealing between early modern polities. In highlighting the Indian Ocean as a space for research on cross-cultural diplomacy, along the lines of analyses pioneered with regard to the Mediterranean, this chapter moreover contributes to the recent shift away from an exclusive focus on Christian Europe in investigating the development of early modern diplomacy, proposing to push it one step further by incorporating Asian encounters into this widening perspective.

So what does the comparison of a Dutch mission to Aurangzeb's court with its west and central Asian counterparts tell us? When seen against other envoys arriving in Delhi during the 1660s, it is evident that the treatment accorded to Van Adrichem by the Mughal court was modest. The envoy's reception was postponed up to three times, the Dutch party received hardly any material support during its stay in the capital, and when attending the *Am-Khas* its normal position was within the red wooden railing, not the silver-coloured fence. However, the way the Dutch were treated seems not to have differed *essentially* from that of other representatives of minor political actors. Van Adrichem's manner of presentation in the *Am-Khas*, his dressing in robes of honour, and the gifts bestowed upon him, all conformed closely to the conventions of Mughal court culture. The items which the Dutch chose to present did so too. Existing discrepancies appeared to have more to do with geopolitical interests than with cultural incommensurability. Further examination of cross-cultural diplomacy will need to test this hypothesis, to start by comparing diplomatic encounters in Mughal India with those at the Ottoman, Safavid, and other Eurasian courts. Yet the case analyzed in this chapter suggests that in terms of adjusting to foreign customs, the differences of diplomatic approach between seventeenth-century merchant-diplomats such as Van Adrichem and royal ambassadors such as Roe may well have been more profound than those between the former and, say, representatives of Balkh or Basra.